Corrected Transcript

Interview with **THORNELL PAGE**
Interviewed by Betty King

Thornell Page was an advisor to Marion Barry and supported him in all his campaigns. He was Director of the Extension Service at the University of the District of Columbia, and by choice never served in the Mayor's office. He later went on to other jobs, including being Assistant Director of Community Services in the administration of President Clinton. He is now President of Page Research Associates, Inc.

Date of Interview: September 22, 2015

INTERVIEWER: Tell me about when you came to the district or was this your home?

THORNELL PAGE: No. I came to the district in the early '60s. My home is South Carolina. I did not come directly from South Carolina, but home is South Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: And what were you doing when you came here?

THORNELL PAGE: My first engagement was Youth Leader at Friendship House, and I was that for about a year, and then I rose to the Director of Friendship House. And as Director of Friendship House, that's when I met Marion Barry, because we were involved in the same kind of activities around youth and empowerment and social justice in the city.

INTERVIEWER: Friendship House was east of the river, was it not?

THORNELL PAGE: No. It's on Capitol Hill.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, it's on Capitol Hill.

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah. It was the largest settlement house in the city.

INTERVIEWER: So you had programs for young people and people of all ages. It was a community center.

THORNELL PAGE: Right. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So tell about—you met Marion Barry—

THORNELL PAGE: Well, I was managing a national youth development program. It was part of the [President] Johnson administration poverty program. And over there we were involved in education for young people and economic development. We had a service station, and we conducted a rent strike over there in public housing, the only one that's ever been conducted in public housing. And we had a credit union, and what we did, Jim Banks was head of the [DC]

Housing Authority, so we worked with Jim to improve public housing on Capitol Hill, public housing on Capitol Hill.

And we never got permanent results. So one day I met with Jim and I said, "Look, Jim, we can't resolve these problems at public housing. You seem to be unable to do it. I tell you what we're going to do. We're going to use a union tactic. We're going to deny public housing the revenue until you improve public housing. We're going to organize the residents and we will put the money in the credit union until you make the improvements." And it was a successful rent strike, and most of the tenants did put the money in the credit unions, and out of that evolved a tenant public housing advisory board, and I was president of that.

INTERVIEWER: How long did it take? How long did the rent strike last before they made the improvements?

THORNELL PAGE: Probably about 6 months, and then they began to make changes.

INTERVIEWER: What year are we talking about when you met Marion?

THORNELL PAGE: I met Marion, I think, in maybe '72.

INTERVIEWER: When he was running Pride [the training and employment program for youths]?

THORNELL PAGE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Or, no. Was he on the school board by that time?

THORNELL PAGE: No, he was running Pride when I met him.

INTERVIEWER: And then were you involved in his campaign for the school board?

THORNELL PAGE: I'm the person who managed the campaign. I put the campaign together.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Tell about that.

THORNELL PAGE: Well, we were interested in improving the educational system and all systems in the district as it related to people without privilege. And so we were looking for ways to do that, and there was a school board election and we decided that maybe this would be our first chance toward empowerment.

INTERVIEWER: Was this the first school board?

THORNELL PAGE: Yes. And so we decided we needed a candidate, and we scheduled a meeting over on Capitol Hill, at Martha Swain's house, and she was on the board then. So we

talked to David Eaton [pastor of All Souls Unitarian Church], so we thought we had a candidate we were going to run for the school board. And whenever we met, David was a no-show. So we talked for about an hour about other candidates and we couldn't agree on it, so then we went around the table and asked each person there, "Why don't you run?" We got to Marion and said, "Why don't you run? You have experience with Pride," and he had some support in the city. And he said, "No. I can't run. I'm an activist. I'm not an establishment person."

So we continued to talk with him and he finally said, "Look, I'm going on a vacation in the islands in 2 days and I'll be there a week. But whenever I come back, if Thornell agrees to manage my campaign, and you all raise $10,000, I'll run." And when he got back, the rest is history.

INTERVIEWER: So he couldn't refuse.

THORNELL PAGE: Well, he didn't think we could do it. No, he didn't think we could do it. Ten thousand dollars was—

INTERVIEWER: That was a lot of money.

THORNELL PAGE: —yeah, fairly good money then. But that was the beginning of his political career.

INTERVIEWER: You know, what is becoming clear through these interviews is that Marion and the various campaigns that he was involved in were much more organized, much more grassroots, much more ground game, as they call it these days, than any other. Was that true in that first campaign?

THORNELL PAGE: Well, the advantage that we had, and one reason we were so successful over the years, is because we had what people in the District of Columbia did not have—organizational experience and passion about change. And so whenever there was a contest, we knew how to mobilize people, and people in the District of Columbia, because they had been disenfranchised so long, they did not. So we always had an advantage that the local people did not have, so that was some of the evidence of it.

INTERVIEWER: When he was successful in getting on the school board, was he elected popularly to be the president, or once the board met did they elect their own president?

THORNELL PAGE: I'll probably try to refine this, but I think that the board elected the president, because we were interested in the slate. We were not just interested in Marion Barry. We had a slate going.

INTERVIEWER: And did you sweep the slate into office?

THORNELL PAGE: Yes, and the victory was overwhelming. It was a victory that we expected to win but we did not expect to win the way we did. And after the victory, I had some remorse about how overwhelming it was because we beat a fine lady. It was just that we felt that her time in the leadership position was not what was needed at that time. But I think Anita—

INTERVIEWER: Allen?

THORNELL PAGE: —yeah, Allen. Yeah, Anita Allen [President of the School Board]. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So now he's on the school board and president of the school board and his next race was as an at-large member of the City Council in 1974. And you were involved in that as well. In what capacity?

THORNELL PAGE: I was the community organizer. I was the person who did the operation, organizing people throughout the city, and I was always the treasurer, and whatever else was needed in strategic planning and that kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: And had Ivanhoe entered the picture at this point?

THORNELL PAGE: I don't think Ivanhoe was there at the beginning. I think Ivanhoe entered after he [Marion] as serving on the Council.

INTERVIEWER: And was Ivanhoe on his Council staff?

THORNELL PAGE: I think so. I'm almost certain, but ask Ed Meyers [head of Barry's committee staff]. But I think he was.

INTERVIEWER: Very good. And was the 1974 win for the at-large seat a huge result?

THORNELL PAGE: Yes, it was. You know, in the district you only need a plurality, and so we always used that to our advantage because we thought that we could get a few more than anybody else.

INTERVIEWER: Now we move on to the critical race in 1978, when Marion ran for mayor against [incumbent Mayor) Walter Washington and [incumbent City Council chairman] Sterling Tucker, and you were intimately involved in that, I know.

THORNELL PAGE: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: So tell.

THORNELL PAGE: Well, let me tell you something before that, and I'm convinced that if this had not occurred, Marion would not have been mayor, and that was the shooting, whenever he was shot at the District Building.

INTERVIEWER: When the Hanafi [muslims] invaded the District Building.

THORNELL PAGE: Uh-huh. And I'm convinced because he asked me to come over to the hospital, and whenever I walked in the room there were flowers all over the place, there were cards and letters. And he analyzed that and decided that, "I've got enough support to run for mayor." So before I left he said, "Thornell, open an account, Marion Barry for Mayor," and I was walking to the car and I said, "We're going to do this."

INTERVIEWER: And if I'm not mistaken, this was in January of 1976.

THORNELL PAGE: I think so. I'm not sure of the date but I'm sure of the chronology of the events.

INTERVIEWER: It was either at the end of '75 or early '76, because it seems to me it was just shortly before the Carter inaugural.

THORNELL PAGE: It may have been, but I know it was the shooting. This conversation took place with him in the hospital, after he was shot, and the planning. So I don't know the date of the shooting.

INTERVIEWER: It was early '76. [King was wrong; it was January 1977].

THORNELL PAGE: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: In '76 he ran for reelection [to the City Council], but I'll tell you, in this part of the city, in Ward 3, when he made appearances, he was talking to people about reelecting him to the City Council but he was also telegraphing that he was going to be running for mayor. Did that happen other places as well?

THORNELL PAGE: Well, Marion was super ambitious.

INTERVIEWER: Nothing wrong with that.

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah. He thought about being President.

INTERVIEWER: Why not?

THORNELL PAGE: So wherever he went, he was promoting Marion Barry and the next move.

INTERVIEWER: So late 1977, early '78 he launches his campaign, and tell about your role in that campaign. I think you wore many hats.

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah, well, as I said, in his early campaigns I've always been the person who was responsible for organizing the campaign on the ground, in all wards. And I've always been,

not in every one but for most of them I was the treasurer. Now whenever we had to have big money, we had to have big names, so like Max [Berry, chair of Barry's 1978 Finance Committee] and others.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, Max Barry. I'm trying to get Max to come and talk to us.

THORNELL PAGE: But there were three things that were consistent. One is strategy, another one is community organization, and management. So those kinds of things.

INTERVIEWER: So you worked with Ivanhoe [Donaldson, 1978 Campaign Manager] and Anita [Bonds, Deputy Campaign Manager] and so forth on the '78 campaign, in terms of the ground game and overall strategy and so forth?

THORNELL PAGE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And it succeeded.

THORNELL PAGE: Everything that we ever did succeeded, as far as the elections. I was not involved whenever he went away and came back. I think that was the first time he lost an election, but we ran for that at-large, I think.

INTERVIEWER: When he came back from jail, you mean?

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: No. He ran for Ward 8.

THORNELL PAGE: Oh. Did he lose that?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

THORNELL PAGE: He lost one election. Marion lost one election.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's right. First when he came back he ran at large.

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah, and I think he ran against our friend, Hilda [Mason, incumbent at-large Council member].

INTERVIEWER: Oh, my God. The mother of us all? I'd forgotten that.

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah. He ran against Hilda, and that was the only one he ever lost.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I'm not surprised. And then, 2 years later, he ran for the City Council from Ward 8, and he was in that position when he died.

THORNELL PAGE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Did you really believe, in your heart of hearts, that we were going to win in '78? Did you really think we could overcome the polls that said that we couldn't possibly win?

THORNELL PAGE: I was convinced that whenever we entered a campaign in the District of Columbia, we had the variables that would make us winners, and an example of that is whenever we—[Mayor] Walter Washington, [Council chairman] Sterling Tucker, and Marion—were the candidates, we knew that if we could keep Sterling and Walter in the campaign and not allow one of them to drop out, we had the margin of victory. And that's the way we did each time. We knew that we could take our coalition and that it would give us a margin of victory, whenever you had these kind of candidates running.

And there was a meeting called, and I think Sterling and Walter—

INTERVIEWER: No. It was David Eaton called the meeting.

THORNELL PAGE: David called the meeting, yeah, and they was going to—

INTERVIEWER: David Eaton, who was the pastor of All Souls Unitarian Church.

THORNELL PAGE: And he was going to bring Walter [Fauntroy, DC Delegate to Congress] and—

INTERVIEWER: No, no. He was going to bring Marion and Sterling together, with the objective of getting Marion to withdraw and Sterling—

THORNELL PAGE: Right. He was going to bring Sterling and Marion together with the purpose of getting Marion to drop out and throw his support to Sterling, so Sterling could beat Walter, but Marion smelled a rat and he didn't attend, and then he went live with the scheme so people realized what they were trying to do.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. We called it our Saturday Night Massacre.

THORNELL PAGE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: That was fantastic.

THORNELL PAGE: No, but his political instincts—the only person, in my experience, that I've ever worked with who I think couldn't possibly match his political instincts and timing was Bill Clinton.

INTERVIEWER: You've got that right.

THORNELL PAGE: And they are similar in so many ways. Both of them are from the South and underprivileged situations. Both of them are super smart. Both of them could convince people who hated them to support them. Both of them had relationships with their supporters that no one else had because they made people feel that it was personal, and both of them are shameless.

INTERVIEWER: And both of them has a little trouble with the ladies.

THORNELL PAGE: Oh yeah. Right. So they had many similar characteristics.

INTERVIEWER: So Marion wins in '78, and I know that you never went into the government but tell me something about the work that you did that related to the government and your continuing relationship with Marion.

THORNELL PAGE: Well, first of all, whenever Marion recovered, and he was serious about running for mayor, Marion, Ivanhoe, and I had a meeting at Ivanhoe's apartment—I think it was on California Street.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, he lived on California Street.

THORNELL PAGE: And the meeting was for the purpose to analyze the political situation and also to get an analysis about what Marion would have to do to be mayor. Obviously, the lead-off in the conversation was about his relationship with females, because it was never a problem with money or anything, but his relationship with females we felt was a negative. And if he wanted to be mayor we felt that the city would not support a mayor who was living around, and without a family. So it was decided there that he needed to have a family.

Also, one other role that I had, the run for mayor didn't just happen out of the sky. We had numerous meetings about what were we trying to achieve, and we were very clear on that. We were trying to change the political and economic and, to some extent, the social system in the District of Columbia, and probably starting with the Congress and the way they managed the city and disregarding the people. Another one was the attitude about how people without privilege normalize their situation and make it unacceptable so that they could begin to rise up and exercise some power. And the other one is about economic opportunities.

We were clear about how to do the Congress thing. We were clear about lifting up, because at that time the civil rights struggle was only a few years past so there was that kind of information and charge in the air. But the economic situation was more difficult because the people that we were interested in were not part of the economic structure. There were one or two banks, no big accounting firms, no big law firms, no big municipal bond firms, no big firms whatsoever, so we couldn't empower people in the private sector because we didn't have access. So we decided the only place that we had access for opportunity was the government. And that was where we decided to use the resources of the government to bring about change

in the District of Columbia, and my role in that was thinking through much of this stuff and how to do it.

So I was kind of charged with managing the outside and Marion would manage the inside. So I never went into the government. But it provided me with access to do many things I wanted to do, by being affiliated with him. I did the original research for the Office of Aging. At that time we didn't have an Office of Aging. I did original research for that. I managed the first Office of Aging city-wide grants. I managed to transfer some underutilized district property to community-based organizations, and our own house is one. I managed that transfer from their little house on the hill to that surplus police precinct.

Over in Brookland, Brooks Mansion was kind of run down, and at that time Metro wanted to raze Brooks Mansion and use that land for Kiss-and-Ride. And at that time I was head of the Cooperative Extension Service out at the university. The land grant part of it was to have offices throughout the city, so I saw an opportunity to acquire this property, Brooks Mansion, for the city, for the purpose of the Cooperative Extension Service, which I was head of. Metro was also building the Minnesota Avenue line, and they needed space over there. Adjacent to the Metro was a surplus school that was not being used, so I managed to transfer Brooks Mansion to the city for Metro, and the city gave Metro space adjacent to the Metro on Minnesota Avenue.

I was the first manager of the energy program here, and numerous other kinds of things. I was the person who started this whole—

INTERVIEWER: So you started them but under the umbrella of the Extension Service?

THORNELL PAGE: No. Some under the umbrella of the Extension Services and some on the UPO.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I see. United Planning Organization.

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah. The energy program under UPO. The work with the Office of Aging and aging kind of things under the Extension Service.

INTERVIEWER: Then the aging services, the Office on Aging was taken over by the government.

THORNELL PAGE: Right. What was happening then, it was the introduction of block grants, and block grants were new, so in many ways it was new. The city didn't know what to do with it and have it not designated agencies to accept them and operate them. So I served as the laboratory. I am the person who started this whole farmers market initiative in the city, and the first one was under the Metro tracks at RFK Stadium. Now they're all over town, and I did that under the Extension Service.

So wherever I could find an opportunity that would provide jobs, or prove opportunities for people without privilege, I was on it, and I had access to do these things.

INTERVIEWER: Well, and also, Marion used the government contracting program to promote opportunities for entrepreneurs, women, minorities.

THORNELL PAGE: Right. Well, that was part of the strategy, because we didn't have the private sector. So wherever the government created opportunity, we were smart. I mean, we were no dummies. And we were passionate. So that's why we were able to do so many things that seemed unrealistic.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Is there anything else about the arc of Marion's political life that you would like to add to this narrative?

THORNELL PAGE: Well, I think Marion's greatest asset in many ways contributed to his downfall. He was fearless, and whenever you're fearless you're not careful. He had a super intellect, and whenever you have a super intellect, you tend to think that you know more than anybody else. So some of these characteristics have contributed to some of the things that happened to him later on.

INTERVIEWER: They were, in essence, many of the same characteristics that made him a success as a politician and as someone who had a vision that he could implement.

THORNELL PAGE: Right. So those kinds of things. And I would've rather not experienced the latter years of his life because the time that I was even involved with him it was so different from what happened in the latter years, so I would have rather not have had the privilege of even experiencing the latter years.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

THORNELL PAGE: Everybody who was close knows this. I had a political relationship with Marion. I didn't have a small social relationship. The social relationship was from big things, but the little private things, you know, I did not have that kind of relationship. And probably the reasons for it, we were very different about how we saw some things, and I was just not drawn to the inner workings of his private life.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

THORNELL PAGE: And one reason may be—the only reason I could get along with Marion Barry, and the reason I didn't go into government, is because we were too much alike. I was too independent to have a working relationship with him, so I always stayed out, because I could do it my way. And if you were in the government, even though my way, I guess, 85 percent of the time would be consistent with his way, I enjoyed being independent, and I still do.

INTERVIEWER: Well, but you also were each forwarding the other's ambitions in terms of what your vision of the city was.

THORNELL PAGE: There's no question about that. We were parallel on that, and dedicated. Marion used to call me at five o'clock every morning, and my wife would say, "Answer the phone," because she knew it was nobody else. Marion never slept, and he'd read everything. He knew more about the government than the managers of government, of individual parts of the government.

INTERVIEWER: He was the master of that. It used to drive people crazy when he was back on the City Council because he knew more about what was going on in the departments than the department heads when they came to testify before him.

THORNELL PAGE: Right. And the other thing is that, in the beginning, with the power he had, he could do so many things that we wanted to do, like the Homestead Program. I met a lady in the bank, maybe 2 months ago, and she asked me, "Did you work for Marion Barry?" I told her, "No, but we were fairly close." She said, "You know, he gave my mother her first house." I meet somebody every month that relates something about Marion Barry, and how he benefitted them or something.

INTERVIEWER: Exactly. They're young people, or people who were young in those years, who are not in jail and are prosperous family men now because of the Youth Leadership Program and the Summer Youth Program.

THORNELL PAGE: Yeah, and that's what people who were outside, who did not know Marion or did not have access to Marion, know Marion, cannot understand how he managed to keep people voting for him year after year, is because of the things he did, the relationship he had with them, and it was important to them and people outside could not understand that and appreciate it.

INTERVIEWER: Great. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add at this time?

THORNELL PAGE: I can't think of anything.

INTERVIEWER: Well, thank you very much for talking to us. I appreciate it.